Make Your PC A Player

What You Need To Play DVD Movies On A Computer

So you want to watch a DVD movie on your PC. It sounds so easy; your PC has a DVD drive, so you should be able to just pop in a disc, and you'll be off to the movies, right? Perhaps, but it isn't always that straightforward. To watch DVDs on your computer, you will need three things: a DVD drive, software to play the DVD, and the appropriate **codec** (**compressor/decompressor**). A codec is software that does the work of decompressing and decoding the information on a DVD.

Popular DVD player software includes Windows Media Player (free; http://www.microsoft.com/windows/windowsmedia), CyberLink's PowerDVD 5 ($49.95; http://www.gocyberlink.com), InterVideo's WinDVD 6 ($69.95; http://www.intervideo.com), and Ulead System's Ulead DVD Player ($29.95; http://www.ulead.com/dp). The latter three of these players include codecs, so all you have to do is install one and you're ready to go. With WMP (Windows Media Player), things aren't so simple, and we'll explain why.

Windows Media Player Specifics

In recent Windows versions, WMP is accessible from the Start menu by clicking All Programs, Accessories, and Entertainment. Choose About Windows Media Player from the Help menu to find out what version you have and, if necessary, download a newer version from the Windows Media site. At the time of this writing, version 9 is the most current, and version 10 is in beta testing.

By itself, WMP can't play DVDs because it doesn't include a DVD codec. But with a third-party codec installed, WMP will handle the job just fine.

Actually, you may already have a DVD codec installed on your PC. It's likely that the software that accompanied your DVD drive included one. In addition, many disc-burning and video applications include a DVD codec.

To find out if there's a DVD codec installed on a Windows XP system, choose Run from the Start menu, type **dvdupgrd /detect** in the field, and press ENTER. A window will display to indicate whether a codec is installed.

Please note that one DVD codec is good, but two *isn't* better. With more than one codec installed, your PC may not be able to play DVD movies at all. If you want to switch to a different codec, make sure you remove the first one using the Add/Remove Programs utility in the Control Panel before installing a new codec.

If you don't have a codec yet, you can download one for about $15. Your choices include InterVideo's DVD XPack ($14.95; http://www.intervideo.com/products/custom/ms/windowsxp/media_pack.jsp), CyberLink's PowerDVD SE ($14.95; http://www.gocyberlink.com/english/products/powerdvd/winxp_plugin.asp), and Sonic Solutions' CinePlayer DVD Decoder Pack ($14.99; http://www.cineplayer.com/decoder/default.htm).

With the correct codec installed, playing a DVD is easy: Just launch WMP and insert the disc in your DVD drive. If the DVD's content doesn't

Windows Media Player will play DVD movies after you install a third-party codec (compressor/decompressor).

CyberLink PowerDVD includes a codec and several advanced playback features.

start automatically, choose the DVD from the playlist and click the Play button. WMP's features for watching DVDs are plain but sufficient; the player lets you watch your movie in a window or use the full screen, switch among languages and subtitles, and access other basic tools.

Don't Cut Corners

Software publishers must pay a licensing fee to implement a DVD codec; therefore, they must charge you for the expense somehow, even if they pass this cost on to you as part of the price you pay for a DVD drive or third-party software. Don't waste your time looking for a free codec online; you aren't likely to find one that's legal, trustworthy, and/or easy to use.

A few free DVD codecs are available, but they're more trouble than they're worth. For example, Cliprex DS (http://www.cliprex.com), a free DVD player and codec, is laden with **adware** (software that monitors your activity in order to display targeted pop-up ads) and possibly **spyware** (software that records your computing activity for the purpose of sharing this information with an outside source). Other software, such as Jon Johansen's DeCSS program, can do the job but isn't licensed by the DVD Copy Control Association (http://www.dvdcca.org) and could get you into legal trouble. If your system needs a DVD codec, save your pennies and purchase one of the reliable codecs we mentioned earlier.

We also should tell you that there is an exception regarding the software codec requirement: Although most DVD drives utilize software codecs, some systems use a hardware decoder. For those systems, an add-on card performs the decoding so a software codec isn't necessary. As long as the proper hardware drivers are installed and listed in Windows' Device Manager, the hardware decoder will take the place of the software codec. Hardware decoders are rare, though; today's PCs are more than fast enough to do the work by using software codecs, so special hardware isn't needed.

Third-Party DVD Players

To make your PC movie experience shine, you'll want to use a third-party DVD player instead of WMP. The third-party programs we recommend include advanced features for home theater movie buffs. In addition, you won't have to worry about finding a codec because each of the third-party players we suggest includes its own.

PowerDVD 5, for instance, has superb audio features (with support for surround-sound PC setups), can show subtitles in two languages at once, and can bookmark your favorite scenes. WinDVD 6 supports DTS Digital Surround Sound and is optimized for watching movies on notebooks (by extending battery life). And Ulead DVD Player can simulate surround sound on a two-channel speaker system and deinterlace screen images for the clearest video playback.

Free downloadable trial versions are available for all three of these programs, so test drive each of them before making a purchase.

DVD Regions

Now that you're able to watch movies on your computer, you may want to view movies from other parts of the world. Well, there's a DVD specification called Region Coding that prevents this (and divides the world into eight regions). For example, DVD player software won't play a Region 2 (Japan, Egypt, Europe, South Africa, and Middle East)-coded DVD on a computer that's set to Region 1 (United States, U.S. territories, and Canada). If you try to watch a DVD from a different region, you'll see an error message or a black screen.

Your DVD drive will probably let you switch regions a set number of times (usually five), but after that, it will remain locked into a particular region. Therefore, changing the region in this manner is not a good solution for people who want to regularly watch movies from different countries.

PowerDVD, WinDVD, and other DVD players won't override the hardware's region setting, but there are add-on applications available that will do this. DVD Region+CSS Free ($39.95; http://www.dvdidle.com/dvd-region-free.htm) and DVD Region Killer (free, but hard to find; use your favorite search engine or visit http://www.digital-digest.com/dvd/downloads/dvdrk.html) can override a system's standard region protection, thereby letting you watch movies from around the world.

(*NOTE: Before using one of the aforementioned applications, check the license agreement of your DVD drive's firmware to make sure you're not violating it by overriding its region setting.*)

Now For Our Feature Presentation . . .

After your PC has everything it needs, you can make some popcorn, place a disc in the DVD tray, turn down the lights, and watch a movie in your home office. Or, as many frequent fliers have found out, it's so convenient to just toss a few DVDs into your notebook's bag and enjoy a film or two during your next airline flight. ❚❚

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